



Association internationale
POUR LA DÉFENSE DE LA LIBERTÉ RELIGIEUSE
International Association
FOR THE DEFENSE OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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ATT. AIDLR APPEAL & QUESTIONS to the UN HCHR on "COVID-19, GOVERNMENTS' ABUSE and VULNERABLE PEOPLE" - OPEN LETTER

Dear High Commissioner,

Today all the world's attention is on COVID-19 pandemic, analyzing all aspects of this virus from the science to its political, economic, social and humanitarian consequences. We all live in the midst of the fear of death and suffering. Antonio GUTERRES clearly resumed what means this emergency for humanity: "The Covid-19 pandemic is a public health emergency — but it is far more. It is an economic crisis. A social crisis. And a human crisis that is fast becoming a human rights crisis" and "the fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war," said the UN Secretary General. Of course we need to focus together and avoiding - what the historian Eva SCHLOTHEUBER stressed: "*the pandemic of the mind*", when "misinformation proliferates and lines between fact and fiction are routinely and nonchalantly crossed. "World leaders must, now more than ever, illuminate a thoughtful path forward". The U.N. represents everyone, everywhere, because since its beginning affirms its "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small". If today the U.N. will not be stronger than ever using a firm voice, sooner or later other actor will rise to take its place which will not be beneficial for everyone. The UN is called to be vigilant, with a clear message, monitoring Member States and all actors, campaigning everywhere for *human dignity* of all.

The AIDLR supports you in your endeavor contributing in helping others. We believe the OHCHR, General Assembly, Security Council, during these times can influence the "path forward" that *all* people to be protected and "free and equal in dignity and rights". In your capacity as a medical doctor and as a former head of government, you understand better "the need for a range of steps to combat COVID-19, and, the often difficult balancing act when hard decisions need to be taken". And for it, "taking great care to protect *the most vulnerable and neglected people* in society, both medically and economically".

Her Excellency Ms. MICHELLE BACHELET JERIA
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland

You are right stressing too: “we are all learning and adapting as we respond to the virus. *Human dignity and rights* need to be front and centre in that effort, not an afterthought”. And “lockdowns, quarantines and other such measures to contain and combat the spread of COVID-19 should always be carried out in strict accordance with human rights standards and in a way that is necessary and proportionate to the evaluated risk”. In TIME you stated: “the COVID-19 pandemic is laying bare some of the *most glaring vulnerabilities* of our societies. Millions of the people at greatest risk of contagion are those whose needs are often overlooked. To uphold their fundamental rights to life and health—and prevent the pandemic from spreading rapidly across the whole of society—we need to take *urgent measures* to resolve the specific risks and impacts of COVID-19 on a number of groups”.

To support the OHCHR efforts for human rights and the fight against *hate speech*, the AIDLR put to your disposition the document “ROADMAP TO IMPLEMENTATION– A SUMMARY REPORT & RECOMMENDATION to the UN STRATEGY AND PLAN OF ACTION ON HATE SPEECH” elaborated during and after the Second Global Summit Religion, Peace and Security co-organized by the UN Office of Genocide Prevention and the AIDLR and held at the U.N. Palais des Nations in 2019, where we have been honored by the participation of Your Excellency by a video-conference; in behalf of your Office joined too as keynote speakers and moderators Dr. Ibrahim Salama and Michael Wiener.

I RECOMMEND you accepting this document (see it attached or linked below) and sending through the OHCHR to all Member States and other actors, as a guidelines on this timely topic to fighting hate speech. I put to your disposition this document:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-bnxaGOn4lifLsJ1FEPsV7F5aqalQlcs/view?usp=sharing>

STATE OF EMERGENCY LAWS ABUSED BY GOVERNMENTS AGAINST ‘VULNERABLES’

In a research I shared to HARVARD Law School I stated: “Fear, extremism and terrorism, creates suspicion of *religion* that can affect specially religious minorities and other categories of people. National security, antiterrorist laws, state of emergency, could be used or *abused* as a limiter for fundamental freedoms, or used as a multipurpose tool. For reasons of “terrorism, fear and pandemic”, it is possible that freedom of religion, religious minorities and believers, to come under a global or national suspicion”. Until today “no fewer than 84 Governments have enacted emergency laws vesting extra authority in the executive. In some cases these powers are necessary to fight the pandemic and will be relinquished when it is over. But *in many* cases they are not, and won’t be. Unscrupulous autocrats are exploiting the pandemic to do what they always do: grab power at the expense of people they govern”. Unfortunately under “state of emergency” “national security” and “antiterrorist laws”, some governments, populists and extremists abuse, prejudice, manipulate and spread fake news, affecting some specific categories. A significant problem arises regarding the morality of an inadequate state response, or if the state acts outside of any law.

Excellency, due to COVID-19 pandemic, I warn of the danger of *hate speech pandemic* and growing harassment, violence, discrimination and persecution of religious minorities - Christians, Jews and Muslims; and growing the risk of social insecurity, terrorism and famine in many parts of the world, and affecting the most vulnerable people, such as women and children, refugees, migrants; and calling a special attention to the potential disaster looming within crowded immigrant detention centers and refugee camps around the world; and in some countries due to the state of emergency and national security laws, affecting too the human rights defenders and journalists. In times of epidemics, looking for scapegoats is historically common. MORATINOS and DIENG express their grave concern over the increase in stigma, hate speech and

hate crimes targeting individuals and groups wrongfully vilified and perceived to be associated with the Coronavirus across the globe.. The U.N. Secretary-General resumed: Yet the pandemic continues to unleash a *tsunami of hate* and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering. Anti-foreigner sentiment has surged online and in the streets. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have spread, and COVID-19-related anti-Muslim attacks have occurred. Migrants and refugees have been vilified as a source of the virus – and then denied access to medical treatment. With older persons among the most vulnerable, contemptible memes have emerged suggesting they are also the most expendable. And journalists, whistle-blowers, health professionals, aid workers and human rights defenders are being targeted simply for doing their jobs.. “For hundreds of millions around the globe, who suffer religious persecution and violence, simply because they *believe differently*, extremists and governments persecute, imprison and kill people of faith on a daily basis”, stated Tina RAMIREZ. INTROVIGNE reminds us too: “Often, these scapegoats are identified with unpopular religious minorities”. DIOP observes how the arrival of COVID-19 pandemic, “has created or exacerbated racial stereotyping, abuse and discrimination against those who are of perceived Asian descent, harassment, bullying and affecting specially the vulnerable communities”. Pandemic had created a situation of “favoring the terrorists”, “constant insecurity and we are facing persecution because of our faith”. There has been a significant rise in accusations that Jews, as individuals and as a collective, are behind the spread of the virus or are directly profiting from it, said KANTOR. India “experienced...the unleashing of a wave of intolerance against religious minorities, and infections of Covid-19 were being exploited by the Islamophobic establishment to generate hostility against Muslims said VARADARAJAN. Indian hospitals refused to admit Muslims as coronavirus causes Islamophobia surge.

David BEASLEY from UN World Food Programme, stresses: “We are not only facing a global health pandemic but also a global humanitarian catastrophe. Millions of civilians living in conflict-scarred nations, including many women and children, face being pushed to the brink of starvation, with the spectre of famine a very real and dangerous possibility. The economic crisis in Lebanon affecting millions of Syrian refugees, we’re already facing a perfect storm”. We are also on the brink of a hunger pandemic in Yemen, Syria, Burkina Faso, Central Sahel region, Mali, Niger, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, Cameroon, Uganda, Ethiopia, Haiti, Bangladesh, India, Venezuela, etc. Joao MARTINS & ADRA-Europe is calling on to decision-makers and people of influence to consider the education for the most vulnerable and marginalized and the access to health care, social care, and social protection must not be compromised by discrimination, on any grounds. CARITAS also is sounding the alarm: because “the Covid-19 is a silent catastrophe; and what will happen to the most vulnerable people in Congo, Rwanda, or Burundi?” and “what about the tens of thousands of people remaining trapped in the camps on the Greek islands, including older people, people with disabilities, and among them 1752 unaccompanied children?”

Excellency, you stressed: “The COVID-19 pandemic is laying bare some of the most glaring vulnerabilities of our societies. Millions of the people at greatest risk of contagion are those whose needs are often overlooked”. Antonio GUTERRES stated too: “Now when Covid-19 fast is becoming a human rights crisis, people, and their rights, must be front and centre. We see the disproportionate effects on certain communities, the rise of hate speech, the targeting of vulnerable groups, and the risks of heavy-handed security responses undermining the health response. Against the background of rising ethno-nationalism, populism, authoritarianism and a pushback against human rights in some countries, the crisis can provide a *pretext* to adopt repressive measures for purposes unrelated to the pandemic. We must ensure that any emergency measures — including ‘state of emergency’ — are legal, proportionate, necessary and non-discriminatory, have a specific focus and duration, and take the least intrusive approach possible to protect public health”. ZAMPINI recognized that “the future starts today, and we should be conscious that the decisions that are being taken by governments and world leaders in these months will shape the future of

our world.” HARARI stated too: “The decisions people and governments take in the next few weeks will probably shape the world for years to come. They will shape also our economy, politics and culture. Yes, the storm will pass, humankind will survive, most of us will still be alive — but we will inhabit a different world”. In other words, we’ll see a rapidly changing notion of leadership, one that may never return to the old “normal” stated professor Azza KARAM.

QUESTIONS:

Based on your statements and our researches, permit me addressing you the next questions on issues that affect seriously some categories of people:

1. HOW GOVERNMENTS CAN BE MONITORED ON ‘NATIONAL SECURITY’ & ‘STATE OF EMERGENCY’ ABUSE, AND WHAT “URGENT MEASURES” THE OHCHR COULD FURTHER PROPOSE TO FACE SPECIFIC RISKS ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE CATEGORIES:

A. RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND PROTECTING FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Growing of *hate speech* and discrimination against the religious minorities – Christians, Jews, Muslims, those *crime* is to be ‘different’ *versus* ‘majority’, they face the risk to be under a continue attack of government where there is a *state religion*; also they can be under the attack of terrorists, extremists and populists.

B. REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

Based on “The emergence of COVID-19 cases in camps and migrant-detention centers in several countries—including Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Greece and Syria—is another pressing concern”. Discrimination and violence against Syrian refugees and migrants that are now in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, or at the doors of Europe...and strongly affecting Rohingya - one of the most persecuted minorities in the world.

C. JOURNALISTS, HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS, POLITICAL OPPONENTS

Some Governments use and abuse the ‘state of emergency’ against human rights defenders, human rights activists, pro-democracy figures, and journalists. In this time of crisis, people face more *surveillance* of totalitarian regimes, *intimidation, false accusations and fake news, attacks and arrests* of vulnerable people. On Hong Kong the ‘state of emergency’ was used against political opponents Jimmy Lai, the prominent barrister Martin Lee, Margaret Ng and other 12 people for their protests in 2019. A national lockdown is precisely the time when pro-democracy activists and journalists in a democracy need to be free to write “without worrying about a midnight knock”. The human rights activist from India, Gautam Navlakha and Anand Teltumbde a leading intellectual, were taken into custody under a “draconian antiterrorism law”.

D. PROTECTION & SUPPORT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY/ HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

Humanitarian and development agencies are particularly vulnerable because they rely on a steady stream of donations, business support, and government investments. Without them, more vulnerable people will be at risk, which in turn will deepen the impact of the pandemic across all societies” stated MARTINS and AHAC.

2. AN ALARMING SITUATION IS THE LACK OF PROTECTIVE MEDICAL EQUIPMENT FOR DOCTORS AND NURSES. HOW U.N. CAN ASSIST THE MOST AFFECTED COUNTRIES ON MEDICAL EQUIPMENT, ESPECIALLY THE COUNTRIES WITH A DEFICIENT HEALTH SYSTEM?

Today, in the forefront of the virus are doctors, nurses, pharmacists, scientists who risk their health and lives and who deserve all our thanks, respect, appreciation and support! Unfortunately, my own country, Spain, based on sources from the Federation of Health and Social Health Sectors fixes at 40,000 the health workers infected with coronavirus.

3. HOW U.N. CAN FACE THE DANGER OF *FAMINE* AS A GLOBAL HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE THAT AFFECTS STRONGLY WOMEN AND CHILDREN FROM AFRICAN COUNTRIES AND OTHER REGIONS ?

The economic crisis will bring poverty, social tensions and famine in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and in every country of entire world. I urge the OHCHR, the Security Council, the General Assembly, to pay a special attention in favor of those *special categories of people* described above who are or could be dramatically affected by Covid-19 and its consequences, with catastrophic implications for them and for humanity.

AIDLR DATA ON ITS ROLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, PEACE AND SDGs

High Commissioner,

The organization that I represent as Secretary-General, was founded in 1946 by Dr. Jean Nussbaum and enjoyed the close collaboration of personalities who were honorary presidents and collaborated with us throughout the almost 75 years of the AIDLR' journey: Franklin Eleanor Roosevelt, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, Rene Cassin, Paul-Henry Spaak, Edgar Faure, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Mary Robinson, and Adama Dieng. The goal assumed by AIDLR is to disseminate all over the world the principles of freedom of conscience and religious liberty, and to protect in all legitimate ways, the right of every man to worship as he chooses or to practice no religion at all. Our Association that doesn't represent any particular church or political party, has assumed the task of gathering all spiritual forces to fight against intolerance, discrimination and fanaticism in all their forms that affects vulnerable people such as refugees, migrants, religious minorities, women, children, etc., building bridges among people and fostering inclusivity.

The AIDLR that is a strong ally of the UN, organizes and supports projects of education for human rights, based on human dignity, respect for differences of religions, faiths and cultures. The AIDLR strongly condemns hate speech and any abuse, harassment, intolerance, discrimination and persecution orchestrated or tolerated by Governments, other organizations, religious entities or its leaders. Only during the last five years, the AIDLR **initiated and co-organized six big international events**: 2 Global Summits on "Religion, Peace and Security" held at Palais des Nations in Geneva; 4 International Conferences, Seminars and side-events, sponsored by different member states; participated as a keynote speaker at the G-7 International Conference "Security and Hate Speech" held in Rome; at the G-20 Interfaith Forums held in China, Germany, Japan; at the OSCE/ODIHR; at the European Parliament; at the 6th Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism, held in Jerusalem; at the Launch by the UN Secretary-General of the UN Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors held at the UN Headquarters in New York; at the World Tolerance Summit held in Dubai; at the launch of the New Alliance of Virtue, held in Abu-Dhabi; and so on. The AIDLR has coordinated and co-signed with the UN OSAPG the Roadmap to Implementation A Summary Report &

Recommendation to the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, document useful for Member States, faith-based actors, others, as a guidelines on countering hate speech. **The AIDLR published** during the last years 6 books on: Worldwide Human Rights and Religious Liberty; History of Liberty and Respect for Differences; Agents and Ambassadors for Peace - Protecting Freedom of Religion & Freedom of Expression Against Violence in the Name of Religion; Religious Freedom's Influence on Peace and Security; Diplomacy & Education for Religious Freedom A Priority for Public Policy, where we included the document Faith4Rights, that I appreciate and I signed too; recently we published: Dignity, Rights and Justice; the AIDLR' Secretary-General authored the 'Dialogue Five' framework; also founded and published the journal Ambassadors for Liberty, Hope and Peace. With International Award of Excellence Ambassador for Liberty and Peace - Jean Nussbaum & Eleanor Roosevelt, AIDLR awarded 15 prestigious actors: peace-makers, ministers, diplomats, religious leaders, artists, from all the world.

CONCLUSION

High Commissioner, we are called: "to focus together on the true fight of our lives". It means the need of unity, working together for the true fight to be free. Let be free of ignorance! Free of manipulation, surveillance and abuses! Free of fear of death and suffering! Free of famine, social inequalities and wars! Free of intolerance, discrimination and hate speech, etc. We can't accept to be protected by

Covid-19 or other pandemic by giving up to our rights and freedoms. Pope FRANCIS advised years ago: "Unity is often confused with uniformity". Unfortunately! There is the global risk that "uniformity" to be imposed by undemocratic leaders, and even to be assumed democratically but not morally. Each one of us has the own place to support and protect life and liberty, health and fundamental freedoms, religious liberty, and to protect in all legitimate ways, the right of every man *to worship* as he chooses *or to practice no religion at all*. Must be protected the right to life, health, intimacy, religious liberty, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and to be avoided the history persecution; *religion* must be separated of state, while the state have to protect and respect religious freedom of everyone. These days when world leaders are shaping the 'new normal', I believe the U.N. "must" be the arbiter, assuming the global leadership to "illuminate a thoughtful path forward" and monitoring any abuses perpetrated or permitted by states and other actors, and never allowing the political, religious or other entities to impose their agenda to the detriment of the principles and values of the U.N. Charter and the UDHR.

While the AIDLR waits the answer of Your Excellency to the questions addressed in this letter, I express you again my desire to work together with the U.N. in the benefit of humanity.

High Commissioner, I thank you.

Dr. Liviu Olteanu
Secretary General